

Something to Eat

Five loaves, two fish, five thousand men ... "And all ate and were filled." I still remember a Sunday school project I did when I was young, cutting out the loaves and the fish, coloring them, and putting them in a basket. I was amazed that so many people could be fed by such a small amount of food. Not only did they get some food to eat, they were all filled – truly a miracle!

But this morning, I want to show you another side of this miracle story. Because even more important than what happens to the bread and the fish, is what happens to the people in this story. The feeding of the 5,000 is really a story about people, not about food. Jesus doesn't multiply the bread and the fish to impress anyone, or to show off his power or divinity. He multiplies the bread and the fish to feed the hungry people, to fill their need for food. It is much more than a story about food – it is a story about the compassion Jesus showed to his disciples and to the great crowd he had attracted.

Let's take a look at just what did happen that day. Our story begins with the disciples gathered around Jesus. They have just returned from preaching and healing under his authority. They are tired and worn out. There is no peace and quiet – they have no leisure even to eat! They want time to share their stories, to tell Jesus about the great things they were able to accomplish. So Jesus suggests that they go off together, he and his disciples, to a quiet place so that they may rest a while. Jesus is thinking about his disciples, tending to the needs of his followers. And so off they go, but their so-called vacation is over before it even gets started. Crowds have gathered and await them on shore. People had found out just when and where Jesus and his disciples were headed, and beat them there. The designated spot is no longer a deserted or lonely place, but a **crowded** place.

And how does Jesus respond to the crowds? Scripture tells us, "He saw a great crowd and he had great compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." He doesn't get angry. He sees people in need, people who are like lost sheep, people who need direction. And he begins to

teach them many things. Jesus saw their need and has responded. **He** will give them direction, **he** will be their shepherd.

But what about the disciples? Are their needs being met while Jesus is teaching the crowds? Jesus is setting an example for them, showing them how to care for the needs of others. Jesus knows that times will get rough for his disciples, and he wants them to be prepared for the time when he is no longer with them, when the disciples will be the only ones to teach and show compassion for the crowds. And the disciples do show their concern for the crowd. As night falls, they suggest that Jesus send the crowds away so that they can get something to eat. So how does Jesus respond to their suggestion? He tells his disciples, "You give them something to eat!" What harsh words! No please, no, don't you think maybe ..., no what about ... What was Jesus thinking when he asked such a question?

With this response, it seems that Jesus is testing his disciples. They knew the story of the miraculous feeding of the Israelite people in the desert after their exodus from Egypt, how God sustained the people with manna for forty years. So they know that God has the power to miraculously supply food. The disciples have just returned from a trip where they were successful in healing. So they have seen that God can work through them. Yet their perspective is limited; they assume that Jesus is suggesting that they go and buy food. They even tell him how much money it would cost to feed this crowd – 200 denarii. That's about 8 months pay. Where would they get that much money? The disciples have made the mistake of looking only at the human possibilities.

But guess what? Jesus has compassion for his disciple's lack of ability to understand the power available to them. So he shows them that the possibilities are endless when one relies on the power of God. He has the crowd sit down in groups, he asks for any food that is available, and five loaves and two fish become enough to fill everyone, with 12 baskets left over, one for each of the disciples.

Jesus has shown his care for the physical hunger of the crowd and the disciples. He has taught the crowd many things and now teaches the disciples how to take care of the needs of others. The crowd is fed when Jesus takes these meager resources and gives his blessing, and it thus becomes clear to all that "all things are possible to one who believes."

So what does all this have to do with us? Is this story telling us to perform miracles or go out and feed the hungry? How are we to respond to the statement, "You give them something to eat?" I believe that this story sets an example for each of us to follow, even today. As Jesus taught his disciples in preparation for his departure, we need to remember that we are the ones present here and now. As Christians, we are the ones Jesus is relying upon to be feeding people. Jesus shows us how in this story. But what does it really mean to feed people? To give people something to eat? It means to care about people, to care for people. It means being concerned about what people are going through. It means listening to people. It means praying for one another. Jesus showed love and compassion for his disciples and the crowd. He taught and fed his disciples and the crowd. We need to learn to give and receive, love and compassion. Jesus knows that we will make mistakes. He knows that we get so busy and wrapped up in our own agendas that we forget to smile or say something nice to someone who could use both.

I want to share with you a story about a sandwich. During our mission to trip to Appalachia to help rehab houses this summer, our work crews packed up lunches for each day. This meant making sandwiches to go along with the fruit and pretzels and dessert that we had brought along. The family our crew helped had three people – Jackie and Molly, and their 9-year old granddaughter Kami. On Monday, we showed up with 7 sandwiches – one for each of the APC folks, and Kami was visibly disappointed that we did not have a sandwich for her. We shared what we had, and asked her what kind of sandwich she wanted us to make for her on Tuesday. On both Tuesday and Wednesday, we made her a sandwich, but she didn't eat it either day. So on Thursday, we didn't make Kami a sandwich. On Thursday, when she looked in the cooler and saw only 7 sandwiches, she got mad and stormed off. I found her in tears behind our van. I did my best to try to explain – she hadn't eaten that sandwiches we had made and we didn't want to waste the food. She told me I was making her feel worse – which I have no doubt I was doing. The sandwich wasn't to fill Kami's need for food. It was a sign that she was important, and cared for, and we were thinking of her emotional needs. A lesson our whole crew learned that day – all because of a sandwich.

So maybe we can show compassion, or nourish the soul of someone in need. But there are so many in need today; we read about these people in our newspapers or online, we see them on our streets, and in far away lands. The needs seem to be so endless that we can become overwhelmed by the need before us, and overwhelmed by the inadequacy within ourselves. Just as the disciples assumed they couldn't meet the needs of

the hungry crowd, we assume our resources just aren't enough. We don't have the faith to believe that God could make it work, or that maybe what we have could become enough. We need to remember that we can't just look at the human possibilities. We need to look at what God can do through us. Just think how our human potential of five loaves and two fish could be multiplied by the power of God. Let's not be bound by our limits. Remember that God can work through even our smallest efforts. We never know when some little thing we do or say will make a difference to someone.

I want to end with a story that I came across this week: Francine Christophe was put into a concentration camp at the age of eight-years-old, with a big yellow star worn over her chest to signify that she is Jewish.

Originally from France, Francine was put into the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany, where she was allowed to bring something small with her. So her mom packed her two pieces of chocolate, only to be eaten on a day when she was to *really need help*.

While Francine and her mom were in the camp, there was a woman with them who was pregnant, however she was so skinny it was hard to tell. When it came time for her to give birth Francine's mother asked her daughter, "remember that chocolate I was saving for you?" Her mother then went on to explain that giving birth in the camp will be hard, and that the woman, Helene might die – but the chocolate may help her.

Francine gave the woman her chocolate, the last piece of home she had. Helene ate the chocolate, both her and her baby lived. Six months later when the camp was liberated Francine, her mother, Helene and her baby were all freed.

A few years ago, now a mother herself Francine's daughter asked her how things would have been different if those coming out of camps had therapy and psychologists to talk to. That gave her idea, Francine put together a lecture on the topic which many came to. A woman took the podium in the beginning of the speech and said she had something for Francine, to which she reached into her pocket and pulled out some chocolate. She gave the sweets to Francine and said "I'm the baby."

So let us remember that Jesus showed compassion for his disciples and the crowd when he multiplied the loaves and the fish. Today, we are fed and nourished by the love of Jesus Christ shown to us by the love we receive from one another, and as we join in The Lord's Supper. May we continue to follow his example by giving others "something to eat". And may we have

the faith to see beyond the limits of human possibility. May our loaves and fish continue to be multiplied by the power of God.